DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 034 RC 024 001

TITLE	Building Strong Rural Schools in South Carolina: The Foundations We Need.
INSTITUTION	Rural School and Community Trust, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	32p.; Produced with assistance from South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee. Supported by South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.scjustice.org/pdfs/RuralReport.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Change Strategies; *Educational Environment; Educational Finance; *Educational Needs; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; High Risk Students; Minority Groups; Policy Analysis; Poverty; *Rural Schools; School Community Relationship; School Support
IDENTIFIERS	*South Carolina

ABSTRACT

During 2001, rural people from across South Carolina met to discuss how their schools are faring in the new environment of increased accountability and testing. This report identifies six foundations that are essential for building stronger rural schools. Eliminating poverty and improving the health and overall well-being of rural residents could be the best rural development and school improvement strategy available. All students, including those at risk of academic exclusion, should be learning in a positive environment. All students should achieve at high levels, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. All teachers should be provided with the tools they need to remain in the field and be successful with all students. As the closest link between rural communities and local school policy, school boards must have an in-depth understanding of the educational needs and challenges of their students. Education policymakers should provide the funding necessary for a first-rate education. Recommendations include focusing economic development strategies on improving the standard of living in rural communities; reevaluating school discipline policies to reduce the disproportionately high number of minority student exclusions; eliminating the achievement gap on standardized tests and ensuring that special education and gifted enrollments more closely reflect the general student population; implementing ongoing diversity training for teachers; electing all school board members; and determining the true per-pupil cost of meeting state and federal educational standards. (Contains 29 references) (TD)

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Building Strong Rural Schools in South Carolina:

The Foundations We Need

Presented by

The South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee

With Support from
The Rural School and Community Trust and the
South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center

RC024 001

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Dear Fellow South Carolinians:

In 2001, rural people from across the state came together with the goal of adding their collective voice to education policy-making discussions. Over the course of a year, we met to discuss the status of schools in our rural communities and how well they are thriving in this new environment of increased accountability and testing. We also shared experiences and information on the perennial challenges to rural schools: teacher shortages, inadequate funding, and communities which lack adequate social supports to remain healthy and vibrant. We commissioned research and analysis of the specific issues we believe to be most important for strong rural schools, and spent time discussing the most significant disparities and strategies for addressing those needs.

With support from national and statewide advocacy organizations - the Rural School and Community Trust and the South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center - we have produced this report on the well-being of South Carolina's rural schools. In it, we have identified six 'foundations' which are essential for building stronger rural schools. Here, we present a summary of the challenges inherent to them and our priority recommendations for policies we believe will make the most difference to rural schools:

1. **Strong, Healthy Rural Communities:** Strengthening rural communities is an important first step in improving rural schools. Bringing rural families out of poverty and improving their health and overall well-being could prove to be the best rural economic development and school improvement strategy available to South Carolina policymakers.
   PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION: Economic development strategies must focus on attracting high-quality, high-paying jobs to rural areas that will improve the standard of living in these communities through higher wages and better benefits for families.

2. **All Students Learning in a Positive Environment:** More data than ever is being publicized on standardized assessments and teacher quality, but it is equally important to monitor how well schools are serving students at risk of academic exclusion and how well they address disparities between groups of students.
   PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION: Every district should reevaluate its current school discipline policies to reduce the disproportionately high number of minority student exclusions from school and report its progress to the community.

3. **All Students Achieving at High Levels:** The achievement gap illustrates the connection between poverty, race, and low academic achievement. The double burden for rural schools in addressing this crisis with significantly fewer resources must be eliminated.
   PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION: The achievement gap on standardized tests must be eliminated, and special education and gifted and talented enrollment must more closely reflect the general student population. Local communities should be actively involved in setting goals for closing the gap.

4. **Well-Trained, Motivated Teachers:** In rural areas, providing both inexperienced and veteran teachers with the tools they need to remain in the field and to be successful with all students is crucial.
   PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION: School leaders should support continued effectiveness with diverse groups of students by including this issue in teacher evaluation processes. Implement ongoing diversity training as part of regular staff development for teachers along with adequate funding and time to support it.

5. **Good Leadership and a Sound Governance Structure:** School boards are the closest link between rural communities and local school policy, and as such, they must have an in-depth understanding of the educational needs and challenges of students in their own district and throughout the state.
   PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION: To ensure accountability to local citizens, all school boards in the state should be elected in non-partisan elections.

6. **Resources to Provide Every Student with a First Rate Education:** Evaluating the funding it takes to provide every student with a first rate education and determining the source of that funding should be the highest priority for legislators and education policymakers.
   PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION: The legislature should commission a study by an independent education consulting firm to determine the true per-pupil cost of providing South Carolina's children with educational opportunities that will enable them to meet the state's educational standards and goals and the requirements of the new federal No Child Left Behind Law.

We are proud to share this work with you and hope that you will join us in our efforts to ensure that all South Carolina schools are strong and up to the challenge of preparing our students for a future full of promise and hope.

The South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee

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The South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee

SCREGC is an advisory board of rural citizens, educators, parents, and leaders convened in 2001 to serve as a forum for community input about rural schools, to analyze state education policies, to identify problems and best practices, and to advocate for policies which will strengthen rural schools.

Carol Bishop is from Society Hill and serves as Executive Director for the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment. CAFÉ is an 18-year-old organization which supports and empowers workers not represented by unions.

Frances Fleming Chavous taught English and was a high school library media specialist for 32 1/2 years in rural South Carolina schools. She retired in December 1998 to return to her hometown to work on community development projects with Allendale County ALIVE USDA Enterprise Community.

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Samantha Evans is a mother of two children in public school and is a staff member of Five Rivers Community Development Corporation in Georgetown. Samantha has an interest in exploring alternative ways for children to learn and in increasing the graduation rates in South Carolina schools.

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Penny Hennigan is from Darlington and works as an organizer for the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment.

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Mildred Myers, executive director of South Carolina Environmental Watch, works on environmental justice issues, redistricting, and education. Mildred has been active in social justice since her teens.

Lana Odom is the Director of the South Sumter Resource Center, which houses many community programs, including adult education and dropout prevention. The Center is the recent recipient of a $300,000 Youthbuild Implementation Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development.

Judy Reddrick is the education coordinator for the South Sumter Resource Center.

Veronica Primus-Thomas, a native of Hardeeville, spent 18 years in the classroom and for the last 8 years, has worked locally, nationally, and internationally to guide and support community organizing with adults and youth in oppressed communities through the STAR program, Serious Teens and Adults Acting Responsibly.

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LeRoy W. Seabrook, a native of Yonges Island, serves as chairman of the District 23 Constituent School Board of the Charleston County School District. He has worked on behalf of public schools in rural Charleston and around the world for almost 50 years, including during his career in the military and other public service.

Oleda Sinkler, program director of South Carolina Environmental Watch, is the mother of three African American males. She has been involved in the movement to impact positive change in school policy since 1994.

Priscilla Taylor is from Greenville and works for the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment.

Alice Doctor-Wearing helped found the Scott's Branch '76 Foundation Community Development Corporation in her hometown of Summerton, and has served as its executive director since 1996. She has worked to increase healthcare access, quality childcare, employment opportunities and affordable housing in this community for over a decade.

James Williams is a minister in Effingham who works with children and families. He believes that a quality education is the foundation for one's developing to their fullest potential.

The Rural School and Community Trust

The Rural Trust is the premier national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving rural communities. Working in some of the poorest, most challenging rural places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, advocates for appropriate state educational policies, and addresses the critical issue of funding for rural schools.

Lynnette Harrison is the Field Services Coordinator for the Policy Program for the Rural Trust. She holds a master's degree in Public Administration with a concentration in public policy and has worked with rural communities since 1996.

Greg Malhoit is the Director of the Rural Education Finance Center (REFC) of the Rural Trust. After 27 years of legal representation, policy advocacy, and scholarship on education issues, he joined the Rural Trust to head the REFC to help states, rural schools, and communities provide equal educational opportunities for rural children.

Page McCullough is the Field Services Manager for the Policy Program of the Rural Trust. In addition to supporting activists in the field, she analyzes state policy and offers organizational development support to rural organizations working to improve schools.

MaryBe McMillan, formerly a State Policy Monitor for the Rural Trust, planned, implemented, and coordinated this project from its inception. She has since moved into other policy arenas, and her expertise, dedication, and kind spirit are greatly missed.

The South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center

SCALJC is dedicated to advocacy for low-income people to effect systemic change by acting in and through the courts, legislature, administrative agencies, community, and the media, and helping others do the same through education, training, and co-counseling.

Amanda Adler, a staff attorney at SCALJC and former educator, compiled the data and wrote the narrative for this report. Her work in education law and policy is funded by Equal Justice Works and by Nelson, Mullins, Riley, and Scarborough, L.L.C.

Emily Andrews, a volunteer at SCALJC and recent graduate of South Carolina's public schools, contributed invaluable assistance in formatting this report and in charting statistical measures.

For more information on how you can participate in this work to strengthen rural schools in South Carolina, contact South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center at (803) 779-1113.

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Introduction

Rural South Carolina encompasses some of the greatest natural beauty in the southeast. From gentle foothills in the Upstate to the lush Coastal Plains, these portions of our state abound in historical significance, character, and sense of community. Every county in South Carolina contains rural treasures such as Yonges Island in the Lowcountry or Society Hill in the Pee Dee, full of unique culture and traditions. Like tiny jewels, these communities reflect many of the best attributes of our state.

In these idyllic settings, however, there are schools with urgent needs. There are students and families who look to South Carolina's rural schools as not only centers of education, but for family supports, social interactions, and as a defining characteristic of their sense of place and community. However, without resources, statistics indicate that children in these schools are less likely to achieve at their full potential.

Schools are often considered the center of rural communities, and, thus, strong rural schools are essential to strengthen and maintain rural communities. In this report, we look at the needs of rural children and families in South Carolina to identify policy changes that will ensure that rural schools and communities can continue to be the crowning jewels of our state.

45% of our state's population lives in rural areas.
67% of our school districts are in rural areas.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Demographic Profile Tables, National Center for Education Statistics

We live in a nation where the ideal of equal education for all students is cherished. Our state motto expresses hope for all citizens: Dum Spiro Spero (While I breathe, I hope). And yet many rural South Carolina students are not receiving the educational background that can provide that hope for their future. This is reflected in disparate test scores, graduation rates, and other formal measures of achievement that come out year after year.

Rural schools educate a significant portion of our students and these students deserve the highest quality educational opportunities available. By and large, however, the inequities in South Carolina's schools fall along socioeconomic and racial lines – with schools that serve poor and minority students generally offering less in terms of surroundings and opportunities.

South Carolina ranks <u>second</u> in the United Sates in the number of rural students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

Source: The Rural School and Community Trust

Building Strong Rural Schools is a significant report because it reflects the research, analysis, and collaboration of rural South Carolina citizens seeking education policies that better serve rural schools. This document does more than restate standard education measures; it identifies policy indicators that most significantly impact rural schools, and discusses how they can best be improved.

Our policy assessment and accompanying recommendations are presented to inform the public and policymakers about the most pressing needs of rural schools in South Carolina. One of the goals of the South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee is to create a broad base of support to encourage development of policies specifically aimed at strengthening rural schools in six key areas.

Those who know and care about rural schools recognize the promise and potential found within these communities and now challenge education policymakers to address the specific needs of rural schools. It is our hope that our Governor, State Superintendent of Education, state lawmakers, the State Board of Education, the Education Oversight Committee, local school leadership, teachers, parents, and all citizens who have high aspirations for South Carolina's students will read this report and help to implement its recommendations.

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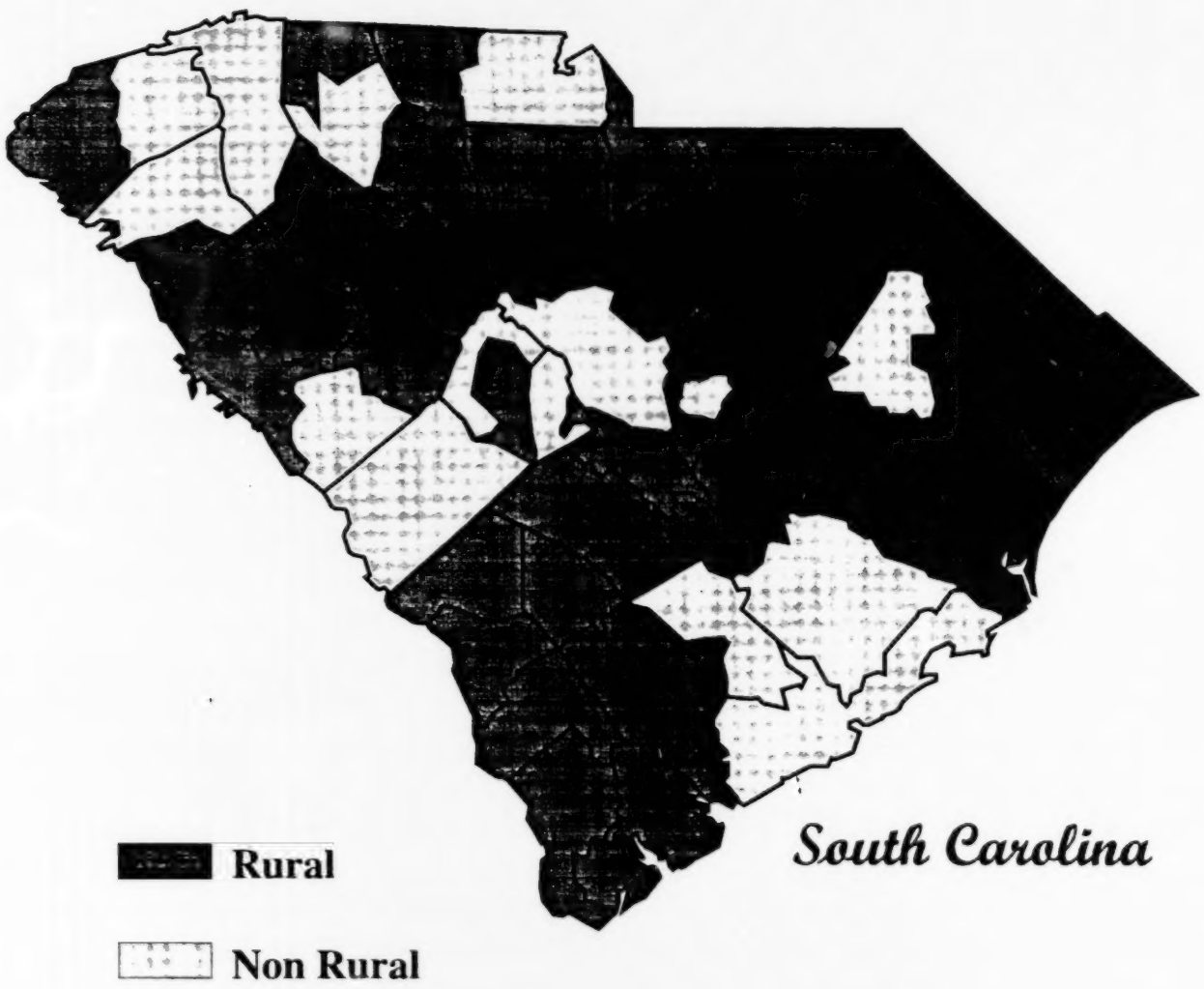
Where are South Carolina's rural districts?



Non-Rural and Rural Districts in South Carolina

This study examines South Carolina's school districts using their National Council for Education Statistics (NCES) District Locale Codes, which are assigned based upon the district's status as determined by the location of most schools in each district. The Locale Codes were developed by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and are based on both the proximity to metropolitan areas and on population size and density. The codes do not reflect all population patterns in a school district but are generally considered to be the most accurate characterization of the type of community students live in. This is still an imperfect system, especially for county-wide districts, but with eight separate locale codes that could be assigned to each school, it yields reasonably good results. Therefore, the Locale Codes were used as a starting point in designating districts.

Non-rural is defined as NCES Locale Codes 1 (Large City), 2 (Midsize City), 3 (Urban Fringe of Large City), 4 (Urban Fringe of Midsize City), and 5 (Large Town). Rural is defined as NCES Locale Codes 6 (Small Town), 7 (Rural, Inside a Metropolitan Statistical Area), and 8 (Rural, Outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area).

NON-RURAL DISTICTS:

Aiken
Anderson 1
Anderson 2
Anderson 4
Anderson 5
Berkeley
Charleston
Dorchester 2
Dorchester 4
Edgefield
Florence 1
Florence 3
Greenville
Lexington 2
Lexington 3
Lexington 5
Pickens
Richland 1
Richland 2
Spartanburg 3
Spartanburg 4
Spartanburg 6
Spartanburg 7
Sumter 17
York 1
York 2
York 3
York 4

RURAL DISTRICTS:

Abbeville
Allendale
Anderson 3
Bamberg 1
Bamberg 2
Barnwell 19
Barnwell 29
Barnwell 45
Beaufort
Calhoun
Cherokee
Chester
Chesterfield
Clarendon 1
Clarendon 2
Clarendon 3
Colleton
Darlington
Dillon 1
Dillon 2
Dillon 3
Fairfield
Florence 2
Florence 4
Florence 5
Georgetown
Greenwood 50
Greenwood 51
Greenwood 52
Hampton 1
Hampton 2
Horry
Jasper
Kershaw
Lancaster
Laurens 55
Laurens 56
Lee
Lexington 1
Lexington 4
McCormick
Marion 1
Marion 2
Marion 7
Marlboro
Newberry
Oconee
Orangeburg 3
Orangeburg 4
Orangeburg 5
Saluda
Spartanburg 1
Spartanburg 2
Spartanburg 5
Sumter 2
Union
Williamsburg

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What do rural schools in South Carolina need in order to better serve students?

South Carolina's rural schools have unique attributes and challenges that deserve close analysis and consideration. Rural communities in our state and across the nation are often characterized by distance between community centers and sparseness of population. They have historically had a higher incidence of poverty and low wealth when compared with suburban and urban areas. Even county- or district-wide statistical measures in our state sometimes mask the huge disparity between communities with high wealth and pockets of extreme poverty. For example, one non-rural elementary school in our state has only 8.3% of its students who are poor, in contrast to rural elementary schools in our state serving student populations with greater than 98% poverty.

24% of our rural students live in poverty.
68.6% of our rural students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

Sources: The Rural School and Community Trust, South Carolina Education Oversight Committee

A good education is one of the most important assets in overcoming poverty, yet educational opportunities are not equally available in rural South Carolina.

Schools are extremely important to rural citizens and in many ways indicate the well-being of their communities. Many of our leaders in the education field now acknowledge that serious disparities exist among South Carolina schools.

It is clear not only to leadership, but to most citizens that students living in economically disadvantaged communities receive a substantially different education than their more economically advantaged peers. This means not only fewer K-12 educational opportunities but also fewer options in the future, such as higher education and economic self-sufficiency.

What does it take to provide the quality education all South Carolina students deserve? Well-trained teachers, the latest technology, and challenging curriculum are all important and require increased and sustained financial commitments, but money alone is not the answer. Resources must be targeted to measures that have proven successful for rural schools.

We believe that there are six foundations of rural schools that must be strengthened in our state. These foundations are necessary to ensure <u>all</u> South Carolina children receive the high-quality education they deserve:

Foundation 1: Strong, Healthy Rural Communities

Foundation 2: All Students Learning in a Positive Environment

Foundation 3: All Students Achieving at High Levels

Foundation 4: Well-Trained, Motivated Teachers

Foundation 5: Good Leadership and a Sound Governance Structure

Foundation 6: Resources to Provide Every Student with a First Rate Education

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Foundation 1: Strong, Healthy Rural Communities

Rural communities and the schools that serve them are mutually dependent. If the community is suffering, it is likely that the school is, too, and if the school is not doing well, it is hurtful to the community. It is also true that the community can build up the school and the school can serve as a beacon of hope and hub of energy for the community.

Unfortunately, by some measures, South Carolina's rural communities are less healthy, offer fewer job opportunities, and lack the social supports necessary to ensure that children growing up in these areas will thrive. Shortages of healthcare professionals, educators, and social service providers in these areas mean that families do not have access to the same resources as their suburban counterparts.

Almost a quarter of all children younger than 18 in rural areas of our state are living in poverty.

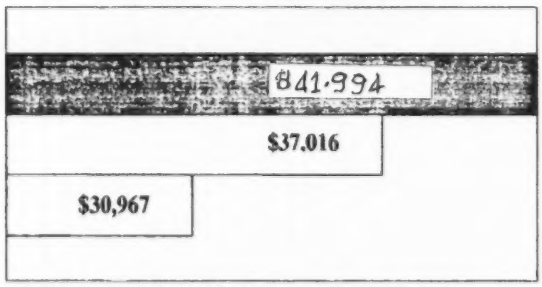
Source: South Carolina Kids Count Report

Low income makes it difficult for families to provide the environment necessary for healthy child development. Although poverty is by no means a complete barrier to academic success, a low income creates hardships for families. This condition can impact students' lives in multiple ways; where there is a lack of financial resources, there may also be inadequate home and community supports, deficient nutrition, or insufficient health care.

The Working Poor in Rural Areas

While capital investment and expansion of industry is evident in South Carolina, many of the state's residents remain poor and are unable to enjoy the benefits economic growth has to offer. This trend occurs because the fastest-growing industries in our state – retail trade and services – offer the lowest-paying jobs. Business analysts have noted our relatively low unemployment rates across the state but caution that a multitude of low-paying jobs cannot improve the standard of living in the long run. Bearing this prediction out, on measures of household income and child poverty rates, rural areas face more discouraging numbers than non-rural areas of our state.

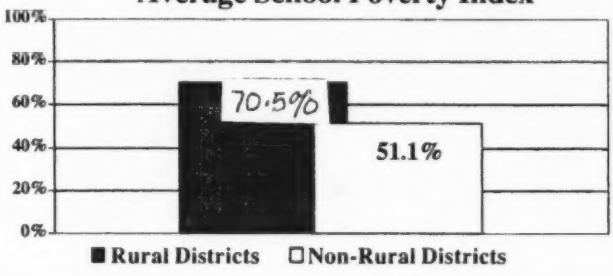
Median Household Income



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Demographic Profile Tables

Other specific statistics that reflect the impact of poverty on communities are also troubling. As a state, South Carolina's incidence of low birth weight babies, percentage of child poverty, and percentage of families with children headed by a single parent have all increased over the past decade. Another way to measure the number of families living in poverty in our state is by examining the number of school-children eligible for free or reduced price lunch or Medicaid. This has been referred to by state policymakers as the 'poverty index.' A shocking 71% - more than two out of every three children in rural schools - are eligible for one of these programs which are based on family income.

Average School Poverty Index



Source: South Carolina Education Oversight Committee

Readiness

Too many children reach first grade without the skills they need for success in learning. Sadly, not every child has a home environment which provides learning opportunities prior to their first day of school. Not every child is able to attend high-quality preschool child development programs. When these children begin school, additional resources are then needed to meet their needs.

In South Carolina, 13.6% of children measure 'not ready for first grade' on the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery (CSAB). In rural counties, this number is even higher – 15.3%, and in one rural county, over 40% of students taking the CSAB measured not ready for first grade. There are interventions that can make a significant difference in the lives of these children even before they begin kindergarten.

Some of the most important interventions making a difference for four-year-old children in our state are child development programs. A recent formal review of these half-day programs indicates that they are highly successful in improving academic outcomes for participating children. The report also notes that rural areas have greater difficulty in reaching all eligible children, and that future resources should be targeted to rural areas.

By one estimate, only one-third of the children in our state who need four-year-old child development programs are currently enrolled.

Source: Department of Education Office of Early Childhood Education

Health

Children's health is not only an important measure of community well-being but is also strongly correlated to how well children perform in school.

By some measures, South Carolina is one of the ten worst states for children to begin life. For example, according to

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data from 1999 birth certificate files, every day in rural South Carolina, 5 babies are born who weigh less than 5 pounds and 9 babies are born to teenage mothers. Overall, teens in the very rural areas are 33% more likely to give birth than are teens in urban areas. Preventable hospitalizations occur at a much higher rate in rural counties, especially among rural children younger than age six. Poor, rural children are also less likely to have health insurance coverage – and it has been estimated that approximately 218,000 children in South Carolina are uninsured. As a result, these children often lack a 'medical home' where they regularly go to receive basic primary care.

These indicators of poor student health foreshadow greater difficulties for students. Disabilities are often manifestations of poor healthcare in infancy, and chronic conditions which go unaddressed cause difficulty in learning and often excessive absences from school. Medicaid can provide invaluable screening programs - including vision, hearing, and immunizations - to eligible children through the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment Program. Other benefits include well child exams and follow up treatment for identified medical, dental, and visual problems. As in many states, a lack of healthcare providers accepting Medicaid patients in South Carolina results in low participation rates – in recent years, only 39% of those children who should have been screened, were. Data indicates that many children – by some estimates, now as many as 52% of all newborns - in South Carolina would be eligible for this coverage.

What works in rural communities?
In Lee County, the most medically under-served county in the state, Health Connections for School Success is a model program that improves both student and family health by providing education, outreach, and transportation services. During 2001-2002, 826 children had access to healthcare because of this program.
In Allendale County, the Smiles for a Lifetime Dental Clinic identified almost 1400 students needing care and treated almost half of them in its first year of existence, with most students returning between 3 and 6 times for much-needed treatments.

Such innovative programs are critical to meeting the needs of uninsured children in rural areas, but systemic programs in schools are also needed make significant improvements in students' health.

School nurses can identify chronic health needs in students and work with families to reduce health risks as well as assist students and families in accessing benefits such as Medicaid that can help pay for treatment. With their specialized knowledge of these programs and other community resources, school nurses play a crucial role in improving student health. Currently, there is approximately one school nurse for every 1000 students in our state, but national standards recommend ratios of one registered nurse per 750 students plus one designated nurse for every 225 students with special needs. More than half of our districts do not meet either standard.

To meet national standards for schools, over 300 school nurses are needed right away.

Source: South Carolina School Nurses Association

In short, students who are not healthy cannot learn and grow to their maximum potential. Community partnerships can help provide some of these missing services, but too often, they must rely on insecure funding sources to meet overwhelming need.

Educational Attainment

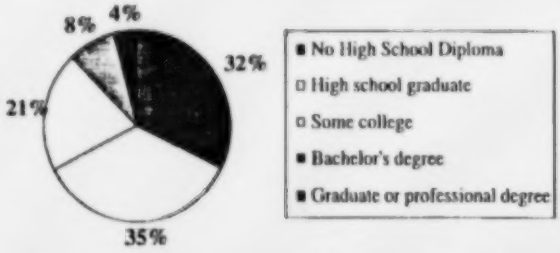
Children's success is strongly influenced by the educational attainment of their parents. According to Census data, in South Carolina, 1 in 5 children live in a household headed by a high-school dropout. Our state also lags behind in the number of adults holding college degrees. According to the most recent research available, one-quarter of South Carolina adults are functioning at the lowest literacy level, which means they have difficulty when facing commonplace reading tasks in society. Unfortunately, there are also barriers to overcoming an incomplete education in our state.

Currently, close to 90,000 South Carolinians are being served in literacy and adult education programs. Approximately 500,000 citizens need some level of these services.

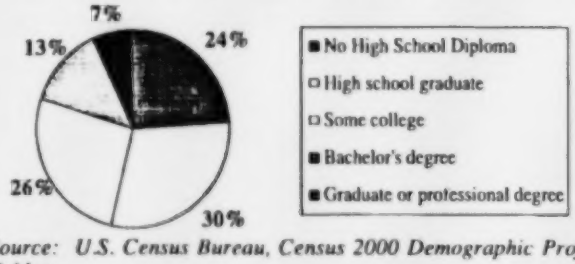
Source: South Carolina Department of Education Office of Adult and Community Education

In rural communities, parents, too, need access to schools to complete educational programs. Many literacy programs available in rural areas depend on dedicated volunteers and shoestring budgets. Adult education programs funded by the state have suffered serious budget cutbacks which limit services to communities that need them most.

Educational Attainment in Rural Counties



Educational Attainment in Non-rural Counties



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Demographic Profile Tables

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Recommendations to Support Strong, Healthy Rural Communities

Strengthening rural schools and their surrounding communities and improving family health and overall well-being could prove to be the best rural economic development strategies available to South Carolina policymakers. A quality education is essential for citizens to contribute not only in the workplace but to actively participate in their communities and culture. Moving more South Carolina families into self-sufficiency is a proven measure to strengthen rural schools and increase student achievement.

- **Enact policies and support current initiatives to improve the lives of rural children before they come to school. Economic development strategies must focus on attracting high-quality, high-paying jobs to rural areas that will improve the standard of living in these communities through higher wages and better benefits for families.**

- **Increase rural children's ability to participate in supplemental educational opportunities that can increase their chances of academic success. Proven intervention measures such as early childhood development programs should receive increased funding and program capacity in rural counties.**

- **Every rural student should have a qualified nurse in their school who can also provide information on Medicaid eligibility and other healthcare services available in rural counties. Cooperative programs that are reaching these students and their families in the community by providing direct services, health education, and transportation to healthcare providers should receive increased support and funding.**

- **Community social services that can also promote economic growth in rural communities, such as literacy and adult education programs, need greater support. Every school district should have a fully funded and staffed cooperative adult education and literacy program that can reach rural parents through extended hours, by offering transportation services, childcare, and workplace-centered programs.**

Rural students are a major segment of South Carolina's school population and the fate of rural communities and indeed the state is inextricably tied to what kind of educational opportunities these children receive.

In 2001-02, 653,793 students attended South Carolina's public schools. About 45%, or almost half, attended rural schools. These students are more likely than the state average to be minority and low-income.

Sources: South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, National Center for Education Statistics

Almost a quarter of the students attending rural schools in South Carolina live below the poverty line, compared to 18.8% statewide. Over half of the students in these schools quality for free or reduced price lunch, the second-highest percentage in the nation. In addition, racial minorities make up almost half (48%) of the students enrolled in South Carolina's rural schools. This is the fifth highest percentage in the nation. There is also a growing Hispanic population in our state, clustered in mostly rural areas. Of the top ten South Carolina districts serving Hispanic children, six are rural.

Unfortunately, minority children, including those in rural schools, are not faring well on a number of measures. They are disproportionately enrolled in special education classes, not enrolled in gifted and talented classes, and are excluded from the learning process as a result of harsh disciplinary actions.

Only 9.2% of rural students are placed in Gifted and Talented programs, compared to 15.6% of non-rural students.

Source: South Carolina Education Oversight Committee

Student Placement in South Carolina's Schools

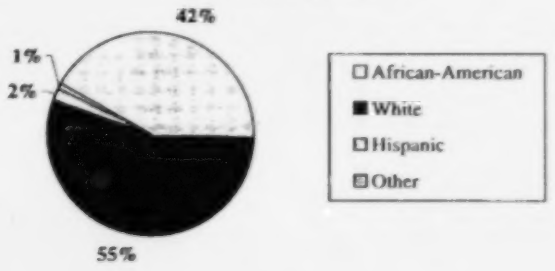
Historically, special education has too often been thought of as a place to send children with disabilities or minority students in order to separate them from other students. Not all special education students have serious, handicapping conditions; many of these children have mild learning or behavioral problems that could be accommodated by the regular education system.

In 2001, almost 17% of all South Carolina students were enrolled in special education classes, and too many of these students are African-American. Although African-Americans make up 42% of the total student population, they comprise 52% of special education enrollment. White students, 55% of enrollment, make up only 47% of special education enrollment. Also, some specific categories of disabilities are significantly overloaded. We know that the State Department of Education is taking steps toward a solution, and encourage inclusion of parental input at each stage in this process.

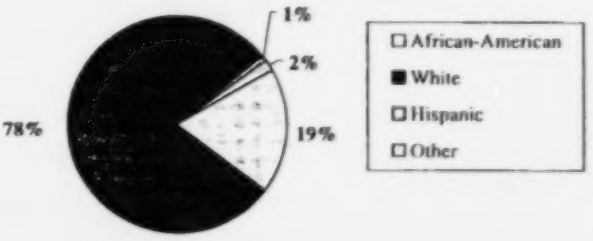
Of the all students in South Carolina who are labeled as Educable, Profoundly, or Trainable Mentally Disabled, 71% are African-American, almost double their percentage of the total South Carolina enrollment. Of equal concern, only 19% of students in gifted and talented classes are African-American, while 78% are white. These numbers are even more disparate in rural districts.

Sources: South Carolina Department of Education Office of Exceptional Children, U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Elementary & Secondary School Civil Rights Compliance Report

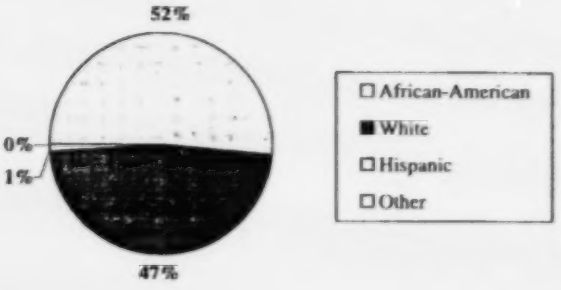
Student Population



Gifted & Talented Enrollment



Special Education Enrollment



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Elementary & Secondary School Civil Rights Compliance Report

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Dropouts

Rural students who drop out suffer personal costs, but there are societal costs as well for rural communities. Dropouts comprise nearly half of the heads of households on welfare and an even higher percentage of the prison population. Students who drop out typically earn only half the annual income of those holding high school degrees, and their likelihood of living in poverty is nearly three times higher.

Calculating how many students fail to complete high school in South Carolina is difficult since there are different data-keeping methods. Recent data showing our state school enrollment level at the eighth grade year and the number of diploma recipients five years later indicates that many students are leaving school without having graduated.

A comparison of rural schools' 1996-97 8th grade enrollments with 1999-2000 enrollment reveals that only 65% of those students made it to 12th grade.

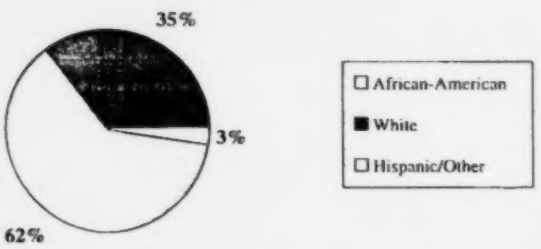
Source: South Carolina Department of Education

There are many interventions that can improve the chances that students will remain in school. Generally, these strategies involve working to develop close, mentoring relationships with students in at-risk situations. Small schools can promote these relationships to prevent drop-outs, as can alternative schools with low pupil-teacher ratios. In our state, districts can access state funding for alternative schools through a grant process, which means that the services available to the students who need them most vary widely from place to place. Also, there are few guidelines provided to school districts to describe the services that should be offered.

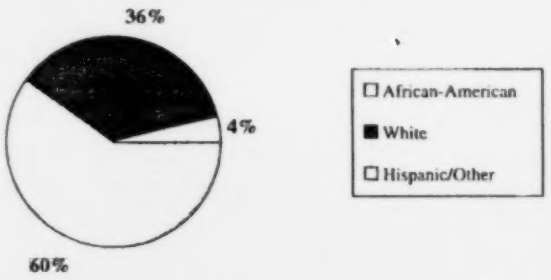
Discipline

Total exclusion from the regular education program continues to be a widely used disciplinary technique. Students who are out of school cannot achieve academic success. The Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education conducts periodic surveys which continue to show that in South Carolina, African-American students are disproportionately subjected to suspensions and expulsions. African-Americans, who make up 42% of enrollment, receive 62% of the suspensions, while white students – 55% of the enrollment – received 35% of the suspensions. Harsh penalties can come in many forms. In some districts, elementary school students are being suspended from school. In others, students are being permanently expelled from schools, and left without any educational options. When schools adopt a zero-tolerance, exclusionary philosophy, students suffer, and the community suffers the impact of uneducated and unemployed citizens.

All Suspensions



All Expulsions



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2000 Elementary & Secondary School Civil Rights Compliance Report

Research indicates that zero tolerance disciplinary measures are imposed much more often on students of color in all states, including South Carolina.

Sources: The Advancement Project, The Civil Rights Project of Harvard University

South Carolina law requires that school crime incidents be reported by district, type of crime, gender/ethnicity of perpetrator and victim and with many other precise details. Unfortunately, this precision is not used when the state collects and reports basic discipline data. Suspensions and expulsions are reported together as an incidence number in districts. With continuing widespread support for stringent school discipline measures, including zero tolerance policies, it is more important than ever to have access to all discipline as well as crime data to ensure that similar actions are dealt with similarly. For example, it is important to know which discipline incidents have resulted in suspension or expulsion, when law enforcement authorities have been called, and for which students. Disaggregated data could serve to focus policymakers' attention on discipline policies that are disproportionately excluding minority students from school.

What works for rural students?
In one rural area of Charleston County, school board members, social workers, and other school staff visit families of students exhibiting at-risk behavior to formulate a family-centered approach to solving problems. This program has significantly lowered the number of students losing their educational opportunities.

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Recommendations to Promote All Students' Learning in a Positive Environment

New federal legislation demands more data be publicized on standardized assessments and teacher quality, but it is equally - if not more - important to monitor how well schools are serving students at risk of academic exclusion and how well they are addressing disparities between groups of students. Only by reducing racially disproportionate disciplinary actions can we begin to make significant progress in improving educational outcomes for minority students in our state. With better information-sharing on these issues, schools and communities can work together on targeted strategies to keep all students on track to receiving a high school diploma, on time, in a regular education program.

- **Every district should reevaluate its current school discipline policies to reduce the disproportionately high number of minority student exclusions from school and report its progress to the community.**
- **Disaggregate and report data by district and by school on suspensions, expulsions, and on students who do not complete high school within the regular time period.**
- **Fund dropout prevention and alternative school programs equally and adequately in all school districts.**
- **Actively recruit rural parents to participate on school-based teams to discuss African-American students' overrepresentation in special education classes and to develop the school-based strategies to eliminate this disparity.**

Foundation 3: All Students Achieving at High Levels

South Carolina implemented its accountability measures in 1998 through the Education Accountability Act (EAA), which includes a high-stakes test – the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test, or PACT. In South Carolina, EAA dollars support programs for students who do not score Basic or above on PACT. Some important requirements of the EAA are providing summer school for students who score Below Basic on statewide tests and providing teacher specialists and others to work with schools where there are many low-scoring students.

Now, the No Child Left Behind federal requirements require that all states have such tests, and test scores have serious consequences for students and schools. The federal law mandates that by 2014, all schools must meet the goal of academic proficiency for every student. Already, in South Carolina, schools that have been designated as underperforming according to the federal law must offer school choice, and most of these schools are in rural areas. Some rural districts can not offer school choice because there are no nearby schools where student transfer is a feasible option. Eventually, schools will also be required to provide supplemental education services. This tutoring will be made available in the form of extra academic assistance for low-income students who are attending Title I schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress for three or more years. Districts will be required to spend up to 20% of their federal Title I funding to offer these services.

For many students in our state, this newest test only reiterates how far behind their peers they are on many measures. In rural and low-wealth districts, the achievement gap between students of color and their white peers on the assessments illustrated below is as troubling as that in the rest of the state, and, in some cases, more so.

School Report Cards

In South Carolina, as in other states, school report cards must be released annually to reflect schools' performance on various measures. In schools with Grades 3 – 8, student performance on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) is measured. In high schools (grades 9 -12), Exit Exam passage rates and the percentage of students eligible for LIFE Scholarships determine the school's grade. In primary schools serving only grades K – 2, report card grades represent some very important information, including the student attendance rate, pupil-teacher ratios, parent involvement, external accreditation that is early childhood-specific, and the use of professional development.

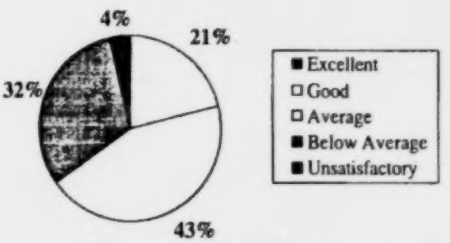
There is a strong link between poverty and student achievement in our state. Two rural districts received system-wide report card grades of Unsatisfactory; both have rates of over 83% student eligibility for Medicaid or Free/Reduced Price Lunch.

Source: South Carolina Education Oversight Committee

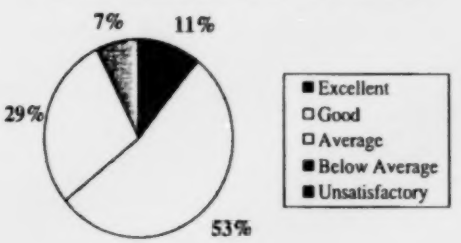
Schools and school districts receiving a Below Average or Unsatisfactory grade - approximately 27% of the 85 districts in 2002 – receive intervention assistance administered by the State Department of Education. Teacher specialists and other support personnel are part of that intervention plan, but there have not been enough applicants to fill all of these positions in the districts where they are needed. This technical assistance is a crucial component of the accountability measures. There have been some improvements in test scores this year, but more support must be targeted to rural schools to prevent other sanctions mandated by the new federal laws that could undermine our rural schools by siphoning off already-scarce resources.

36% of rural districts were rated Below Average or Unsatisfactory as compared to only 7% of non-rural districts.

Rural Districts' Report Card Grades



Nonrural Districts' Report Card Grades



Sources: South Carolina Department of Education and Education Oversight Committee

PACT Testing

Students' scores on the PACT tests have very serious consequences. Under state law, students who are not performing as they should on PACT must be provided with extra academic assistance, funded by the state. Parents are notified of this process at the beginning of the school year and are encouraged to be actively involved in formulating the Academic Plan of their student. If, after receiving this remediation during the school year, students are still below grade level, they can then be assigned to attend summer school, placed on academic probation for the following year, or retained. For the time being, students cannot be placed on

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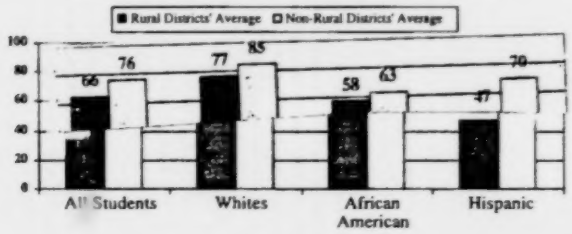
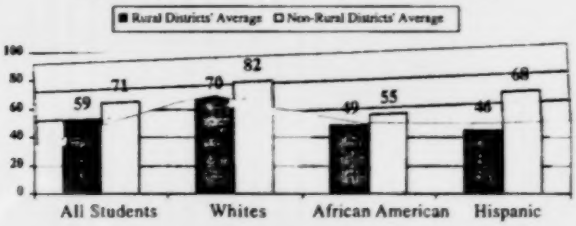
academic probation or retained based solely on PACT scores; student performance, teacher judgment, social, emotional, and physical development are also considered. Parents can appeal these summer school, probation, or retention decisions.

As these charts illustrate, rural students in all groups score below their non-rural counterparts on PACT English and Math tests.

2002 English PACT Results:
Percentage of Students Scoring Basic and Above



2002 Math PACT Results:
Percentage of Students Scoring Basic and Above



Sources: South Carolina Department of Education, Education Oversight Committee

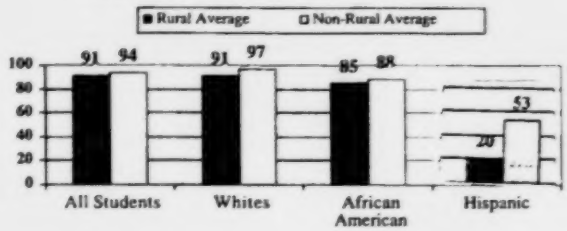
Exit Examination

The High School Exit Examination is first given to students in the spring of their tenth-grade year, and covers three areas: reading, math, and writing. Students who do not pass all sections of the exam are given opportunities to retake the subtest(s) they did not pass. Beginning with the class of 2003, all students will have to pass revised English and Math tests to receive a high school diploma. The class of 2004 will also have to pass a Science test, and the class of 2006 and beyond must pass a Social Studies test.

It is critical that schools have the ability to better prepare students for these exams so that they are able to graduate. Under the new federal law, graduation rates will count toward measures of school success, and improvements will be measured by those receiving regular diplomas in four years of high school – and will not include Graduate Equivalency Diplomas, alternative program certificates, or other lesser measures of high school completion.

Again, rural students score below their non-rural counterparts on the Exit Exams.

Spring 2002 Graduates:
Percentage of Students Passing the Exit Exam



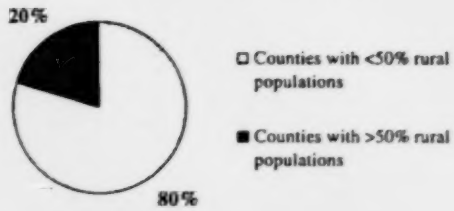
Sources: South Carolina Department of Education, Education Oversight Committee

LIFE Scholarships

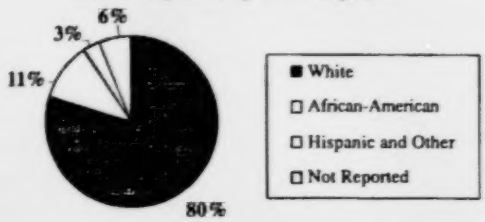
Students must meet two of three criteria to qualify for a LIFE (Legislative Incentives for Future Excellence) Scholarship. This program covers tuition for students who attend four-year public schools in the state and provides aid to those attending independent institutions. The criteria are: having a 3.0 cumulative grade point average on a 4.0 scale; scoring 1100 or better on the SAT (24 on the ACT); and being in the top 30% of their graduating class.

Rural and minority students in our state are much less likely to benefit from the LIFE scholarship program.

LIFE Recipients by County, 2001



Life Recipients by Ethnicity, 2001



Source: South Carolina Commission on Higher Education

Also, the number of LIFE scholarships available based on these standards far outweighs the number of need-based grants available to students in our state: approximately 80% of the total money appropriated by the state for aid goes to LIFE scholarships while only 20% supports need-based scholarships and tuition grants for private institutions. In our state, as in others, merit-based scholarship programs benefit mainly suburban students rather than rural students or students of color.

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Recommendations to Ensure All Students are Achieving at High Levels

The achievement gap on standardized tests and disparity of enrollment in special programs illustrates the connection between poverty, race, and low academic achievement. The double burden for rural schools lies in addressing this crisis with significantly fewer resources. A strong correlation has already been drawn between poverty in South Carolina and performance on formal assessments. The new federal laws mandate that closing the racial gap must be on everyone's agenda, and this will take a solid commitment from the top down. We know that South Carolina's educational leadership is beginning to address these issues, that a task force has been convened, and a conference held. We encourage and support those efforts and ask that the additional specific goals in this report be implemented to address these needs.

- **The achievement gap on standardized tests must be eliminated, and special education and gifted and talented enrollment must more closely reflect the general student population. The Governor, General Assembly, State Board of Education, and each local board of education should resolve to take all necessary steps to end the education gap described in this report. Local communities should be actively involved in setting goals for closing the gap.**

- **Rural districts should receive priority for technical assistance to under-performing schools. Local stakeholders – including rural parents and teachers – should be involved in the process of planning for improvement to maximize local resources for greatest impact and to direct the state-provided assistance.**

- **Continue to use PACT scores as only one factor in retention and promotion policies along with student performance and teacher judgment. Strengthen parents' role in developing academic assistance strategies for low-performing students to ensure that they understand the options available to their children.**

- **Bolster our needs-based scholarship program with increased lottery funding to increase the number of low-income students able to access the higher education system. Set goals for increasing rural student participation in the LIFE Scholarship program.**

Foundation 4: Well-Trained, Motivated Teachers

Teachers touch the future. This often-used expression sums up the significance of educators in the lives of South Carolina's children, and many caring and dedicated teachers are working hard in rural schools to address the needs of their students. Retaining these good teachers and attracting new teachers are regularly cited by school leadership as the most important goals of school improvement efforts.

In South Carolina, rural school districts face formidable challenges in retaining veteran teachers and in providing inexperienced teachers with the support they need to remain in the field. For many beginning educators, small schools in rural communities are often viewed as training grounds before they can move to suburban schools, or before suburban schools lure them away with better pay. Across the nation and the state, studies show that rural schools with higher levels of student poverty end up with teachers who have less training and experience. Also, research has shown that most teachers, given a choice, would not teach in schools in a state or district's poorest communities.

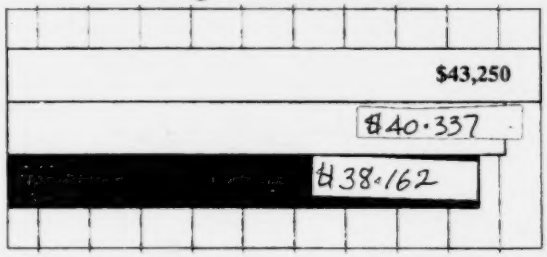
It is estimated by the State Department of Education Office of Research that within the next decade, we will have a hiring deficit of between 8000-10000 teachers. The South Carolina Center for Teacher Recruitment estimates as many as 6500 students in our state are likely being taught by someone other than a fully certified teacher.

These challenges will be amplified as other mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act are implemented. According to the new law, all new teachers hired with Title I money must be "highly qualified," which means that a he or she must be fully certified or licensed, have a bachelor's degree, and show competence in subject knowledge and teaching skills (generally demonstrated by passing a rigorous state test). By 2005, all teachers must meet this standard. Title I schools must also inform parents if their child is taught for more than four weeks by an unqualified teacher, and parents already have a right to request information on the qualifications of teachers in a school. Rural districts in South Carolina need increased support to offer teachers sufficient salary, incentives, and training to meet the unique challenges of teaching in rural areas and of these stringent federal requirements.

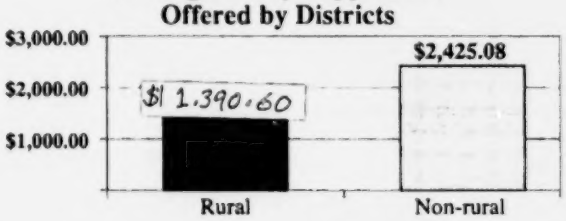
Teacher Salaries

In South Carolina, districts must meet the state minimum salary scale set each year. Most districts add a local incentive to their teachers' pay to supplement that minimum amount. This incentive is funded through local property taxes. The amount of this supplement varies widely; not surprisingly, it is rural districts that are unable to offer significantly more than the state minimum.

Average Teacher Salaries



Average Salary Supplement Offered by Districts



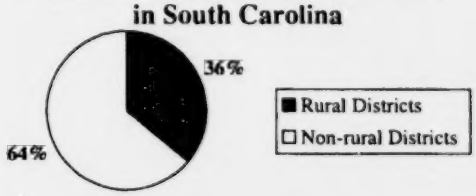
Sources: State Department of Education, Education Oversight Committee, American Federation of Teachers

The average teacher salary in South Carolina represents 87.7% of the U.S. average and ranks thirtieth among all states. Nationwide, in 2001, new college graduates received average salary offers of $42,712, compared to an average beginning teacher salary of $28,986, illustrating the significant gap between teaching and private sector earnings.

Other Incentives

South Carolina awards Nationally Board Certified teachers an additional $7500 per year for ten years. This is an important accomplishment and reward for good teachers, but not all districts are able to equally support the process. While working on the portfolio-style application, teachers often need technical support from their schools, and wealthy districts with ample resources are able to offer this assistance, as well as local incentive pay on top of the state stipend. There is a striking disparity in what rural districts with few resources are able to provide to support and attract these strong teachers.

Nationally Board Certified Teachers in South Carolina



Source: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

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The South Carolina Teacher Loan Program is available for both undergraduate and graduate students who plan to teach in either subject or geographic areas of critical need. Criteria for districts to qualify are based on students' eligibility for free or reduced price lunch or Medicaid; 30% or more of the student population must be eligible to qualify. These loans are forgiven at accelerated rates for teachers in one of the critical subjects or districts. This is an extremely supportive incentive, but there are too few participants to fill the disproportionate need for teachers in rural districts. Thirteen of the fifteen districts identified as geographical critical needs teaching needs districts for 2002-2003 are rural. In 2001, 1462 South Carolina graduates received these loans, but the year before, over 6000 teachers were hired by districts across the state.

Teacher Supports

A good salary for teachers is necessary but not sufficient as a strategy for filling teaching vacancies in rural and low-wealth schools. Higher salaries alone cannot meet the needs of rural teachers without other factors. Research shows teachers working in 'hard to staff' schools rely on strong school leadership, supportive colleagues, and expert teachers as mentors. New teachers could also benefit from other systemic supports that do not rely on funding, such as limits on the number of daily preparations, number of exceptionally difficult students they receive, and on non-instructional duties.

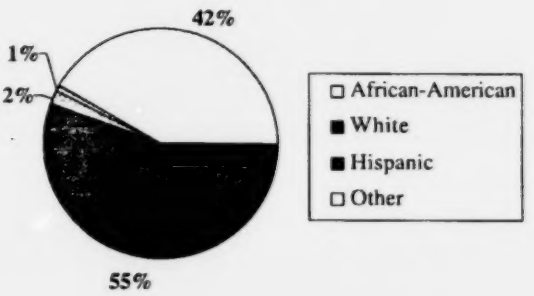
Implementing the high standards set by both our state's Education Accountability Act and the federal No Child Left Behind Law in the classroom has made teaching a more challenging job than ever for new and veteran teachers. Keeping educators abreast of the significant changes demanded by new laws is a daunting, and expensive task. As accountability measures grow and change for our schools, teachers need a constantly updated stream of information and training on new curriculum standards, tests, and record-keeping requirements. All schools need mechanisms for helping teachers ensure that state standards are reflected in what is being taught in classrooms every day. But rural schools with fewer resources and staff need to receive priority in training and other assistance to help their teachers guide their students to academic success.

Teacher Training

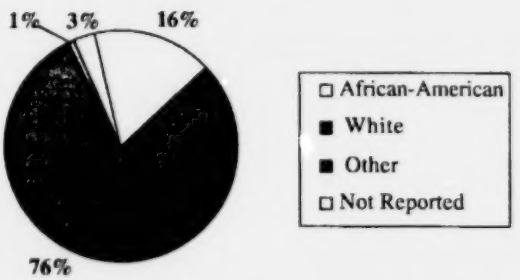
In rural schools, teachers must be prepared to serve a higher proportion of disadvantaged students, higher numbers of students with learning difficulties, and higher numbers of students whose primary language is not English. These and other challenges necessitate changes in teacher preparation programs to better prepare candidates for rural schools. Teachers who have had the opportunity for training and practice in challenging settings gain needed insight and confidence. By establishing working relationships with their rural communities, teaching colleges in South Carolina better prepare their students for careers in rural schools.

Another issue facing all South Carolina schools is the disparity between our minority student population – 44% - and our minority teaching population – 17%. To be effective, teachers need to know much more about differences that can arise from students' culture, family background, and prior schooling, and research confirms that student learning is impacted by teachers' recognition of diversity.

Student Population



Teacher Population



Source: South Carolina Center for Teacher Recruitment

College teacher preparation programs must uniformly prepare future teachers to teach racially diverse populations of students. Teachers should receive specific coursework and practical experience so that they are ready to teach diverse groups of students.

What works for rural schools?
Coker College trains second-career teachers who live in small-town and rural South Carolina to encourage long-term commitments to these communities and schools.

Clemson University is collaborating with Benedict College, Claflin College, and Morris College on the Call Me Mister Program, which is designed to recruit and train African-American men as elementary school teachers.

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Recommendations to Ensure Rural Schools Have Well-Trained, Motivated Teachers

Educators who have made a career of working with South Carolina's most challenging students speak of the immeasurable rewards of this difficult job and their students recognize these teachers' impact on their lives. Educators must be fully prepared to work with students from every population in our state – whether that is African-American, Hispanic, White, rural, or suburban. In rural areas, competing successfully for the best teaching program graduates, providing inexperienced teachers with the tools they need to remain in the field, and retaining veteran teachers with competitive salaries and other support is crucial.

- **Support continued effectiveness with diverse groups of students by including this issue in teacher evaluation processes. Implement ongoing diversity training as part of regular staff development for teachers along with adequate funding and time to support it.**
- **Include more detailed data on school report cards on the use of long-term substitutes in all South Carolina classrooms.**
- **Equalize teacher salaries across the state by increasing state funding to low-wealth districts that cannot match the state average. Provide greater incentives to all teachers willing to work in high-need rural schools.**
- **Require every teacher preparation institution to establish ongoing partnerships so that every rural district is connected to a teacher preparation institution and receives student teachers as well as staff development and other supports.**

Foundation 5: Good Leadership and a Sound Governance Structure

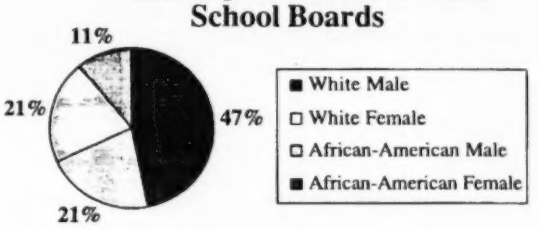
Every day in South Carolina, school administrators and the school boards that guide their work must address the challenges described throughout this report. Their decisions impact students, teachers, families, and the community at large on a daily basis, as they make policy determinations about student placement, personnel, and funding needs of their schools. The ability of rural school leadership to impact other policies is not easily measured statistically, but the influence school administrators and boards have on finance issues, in selecting and implementing student support programs, on the hiring of teachers, and in creating and carrying out school discipline policies impacts rural schools and students daily. These authorities must therefore reflect their constituents' beliefs, be responsive to their communities' needs, and be able to creatively approach challenges.

Choosing School Leadership

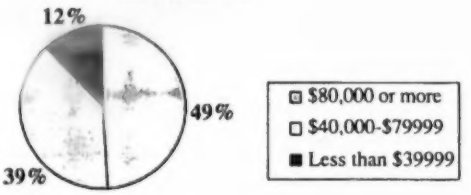
There is a notable lack of uniformity in South Carolina among the eighty-five school boards in the manner in which they are selected. Two rural counties in South Carolina - Dillon and Marion - still have appointed school boards leading their seven districts. Yet another – Clarendon – has one appointed board, one elected, and one combination of the two among its three school districts. Four districts still engage in partisan elections of board members; all of these are rural districts – Chester, Georgetown, Horry, and Lee. When citizens cannot directly elect their boards, their voices are less likely to be heard on important policy matters. Furthermore, political affiliation is not relevant to determine whether a candidate will be an effective and responsive school board member.

Another important measure of leadership is how well school boards reflect the communities they serve, and there is still some disparity in the demographic measures. For example, African-American females, approximately 16% of our state's population, only make up 1[illegible] of school board membership. White females, 35% of the state's population, only comprise 20% of school boards. Also, school board members on average are far wealthier than the communities they serve. Almost half make $80,000 or more, twice what the average teacher makes and well over twice the median household income in our state. School boards should more closely mirror their constituencies, and expanded programs to encourage wider board participation could help increase different groups' representation.

Make-Up of South Carolina School Boards



Average Income of S.C. School Board Members



Source: South Carolina School Boards Association

Financial Decision-Making

School boards need the ability to set their annual budgets and secure the necessary funding to provide what students need. In many rural districts in our state, this is not allowed. As a result, responsible leaders cannot select and plan the best educational services for their schools, and this can significantly undermine student success.

Fiscal autonomy – the ability to tax the local property base – has been the subject of an ongoing debate. Because there is not full state funding of education in this state, taxing the local districts is necessary to meet the needs of students. Not all school boards have the ability to raise millage rates in order to generate additional tax revenue to meet legal requirements, student growth requirements and the wishes of their local communities. Some boards are limited by statutory caps, some require permission from county or state representatives to make certain fiscal decisions, and still others must have their budget approved by other entities.

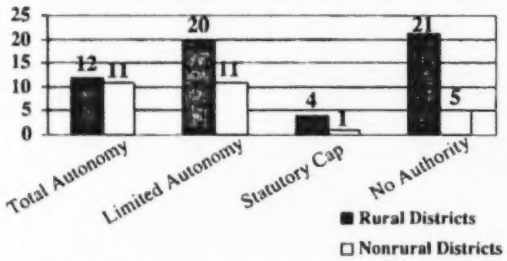
Twenty-six districts in South Carolina have no taxing authority at all. Of these, twenty-one are rural.

Source: South Carolina School Boards Association

It is these local property taxes that primarily make up the shortfall between the funding provided by the state and the cost of providing a quality education. Without autonomy, school boards are left unable to meet financial requirements, and rural districts disproportionately find themselves in this situation.

Some believe that this financial authority does not properly rest with the school board, and that other leadership should have control over school budgets so that there are not unlimited tax increases. Research conducted in this state shows no linkage between increased autonomy of school boards and increases in millage for citizens. There has been, however, a correlation between higher achievement levels of students and greater fiscal autonomy of the school boards that govern those students' districts.

School Districts' Fiscal Autonomy



Sources: South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, South Carolina School Boards Association

Leadership Development

School boards, while operating in something of a limelight, need the ability to play an active, meaningful role in student achievement and effectively report on their goals and progress to the community. Community members, in turn, need the ability to effectively communicate their priorities to the school board.

As the governing body with decision-making power over such matters as student discipline policies and teacher hiring, it is important that school boards have clearly-defined, well-publicized policies and procedures. Uniform organization of roles and responsibilities for board members in our state can pave the way for these leaders to engage in developing systemic plans for success and for creating long-term goals and vision. Also, the community must be a major participant in board matters that impact schools. As the community benefits from a better understanding of school board functions and practices, so, too, will the board benefit from contributions of parents and other citizens who share their vision. Continued training and support for South Carolina school boards on carrying out these goals and effectively engaging the community will strengthen all schools in our state.

An important arena for parent and community involvement in local policymaking is the School Improvement Council. The school board is responsible for convening these bodies, which are comprised mainly of elected parents, teachers, and, in secondary schools, students. One-third of these groups' members are appointed by the principal and should reflect the makeup of the larger school community, including non-parent citizens.

School Improvement Councils play a critical role in determining school-level policy. They are charged with shaping how their school will work toward improvement and with reporting on these measures. They assist in writing long-term strategic plans, monitor improvement on the goals which have been set, and inform the community on progress toward these goals. As part of this planning to improve student achievement, the School Improvement Council also has input on how money received by the district to serve students at risk of academic failure should be spent.

Many School Improvement Councils, especially in rural areas, need more active promotion, publicity, and support by district and school-level leadership to begin to engage larger segments of their community. Also, they need assistance in overcoming barriers to participation faced by rural families and citizens who live far from the school and do not have transportation, or who must work at traditional meeting times. Still other School Improvement Councils are strong, viable bodies with members who are ready for even more advanced advocacy on school policy issues.

Increased technical support and training not only on School Improvement Council membership roles and responsibilities, but on leadership skills can also help strengthen these groups, and their higher profile will broaden the circle of involvement and support in schools. Through this forum, family and community participation in their local schools becomes more significant, and in many ways, School Improvement Councils are the training ground for future leaders.

School governance is a community effort, and rural citizens want to be active in their local schools. Uniform selection processes and fiscal autonomy of schools boards is important to promote accountability to citizens and to ensure school boards have the authority they need to carry out the education of students. By these measures, accountability and authority are equally balanced, as they should be. It is also vital for school leadership to promote an open and welcoming environment not only for School Improvement Councils, but for the community at large so that rural schools can continue to be the true heart of their communities.

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Recommendations to Support Good Leadership and a Sound Governance Structure for Rural Schools

Strong leadership results from the recognition and solicitation of parents' and community members' informed involvement in selecting board members who work to carry out their best hopes and highest goals for rural schools. School boards are the closest link between rural communities and local school policy, and as such, they must have an in-depth understanding of the educational needs and challenges of students in their own district and throughout the state. Ensuring this understanding can begin with standardization of selection processes and authority of boards across the state. Also, boards need concrete plans for how they will provide leadership on the critical K-12 education issues communities throughout the state are facing, and need ongoing communication with parents and community members through School Improvement Councils and other avenues.

- **To ensure accountability to local citizens, all school boards in the state should be elected in non-partisan elections.**
- **The State Department of Education should provide funding for ongoing training for all school board members, and sufficient reimbursements should be provided to districts to cover the full cost of members' attendance.**
- **All local school boards should have fiscal autonomy.**
- **Every school should take steps to ensure that their community is aware of the important responsibilities of its School Improvement Council. Rural parents and citizens should be actively recruited to participate as elected or appointed members.**

Foundation 6: Resources to Provide Every Student with a First Rate Education

We must build and financially support a first rate education system if South Carolina is to compete in the new world economy, if our children are to lead productive lives, and if we are to prepare our citizens to fully participate in our democratic society. Our state policymakers have given voice to this bold vision for education. Legislative and administrative leaders want South Carolina student achievement to rise to the national average and beyond. Our Supreme Court has ruled that every South Carolina child has a constitutional right to an education that includes "adequate and safe facilities where they can acquire the ability to read, write and speak the English language and have knowledge of math and physical science; fundamental knowledge of economic, social, and political systems, and of history and governmental processes, and academic and vocational skills." It is time to make the words of our leaders a reality for the thousands of students who attend our state's schools. Their future and, indeed, our collective future as a state, require nothing less.

What is a First Rate Education?

A first rate education is reflected by two primary measures— (1) the quality of educational resources offered to students by schools; and (2) the educational outcomes experienced by children. In addition to higher achievement on standardized tests such as PACT, there should be a reduction in inappropriate special education placements, reductions in the number of students with serious health needs who are not identified and referred for early interventions, in the numbers of students being suspended or expelled, reductions in students dropping out and leaving school, and in students graduating ill-prepared for higher education or the workforce. Schools should be able to support and encourage active involvement of parents and community members. Educational resources can make a powerful difference in a child's education. This report has made many recommendations that will require additional resources so that schools can provide a first-rate education for all.

Thousands of South Carolina Students Are Not Receiving a First Rate Education

Regrettably, as previous sections of this report have so graphically shown, the reality is that thousands of our students are not receiving a first rate education that will enable them to lead South Carolina in the new century. Despite the hard work of educators, many students, particularly low-income and minority students, lack even basic skills in math and reading. There is a wide and persistent gap in achievement between minority students and their white counterparts. In addition, the state's dropout and discipline rates are far too high to qualify as being "first-rate." Special education continues to be a dumping ground for many students. And, many high school graduates are not successfully entering the workforce or college.

What is the cause of this lack of success? Some of it surely is the continuing legacy of school segregation even 50 years after Brown v. Board of Education. Some of it is due to the economic conditions in our state, which has only relatively recently made the shift from an agricultural economy to a competitive world economy. But, it is also due, in large part, to schools not having the financial resources they need in order to offer all students a first rate education.

Linking Resources to Student Need

A first rate education system is based on the fundamental belief that all children – even those put at risk of academic failure by poverty, race, or ethnicity – can learn at high levels. We know this is possible because there are schools around the nation and here in South Carolina where children of all racial and economic backgrounds are fully seizing the opportunity for a first rate education.

Nationally, education researchers have established a clear link between a student's race, poverty and educational achievement. South Carolina is no exception. As shown in this report, those students who are not succeeding are overwhelmingly poor and minority. There is a broad consensus among education researchers on the resources needed by at-risk students to be successful: highly qualified teachers, small class size, appropriate instructional materials, safe and modern school facilities, and continuous intervention programs that provide "more time on task," including early childhood education, remediation programs, and after-school programs, among others. In fact, the effect of these interventions can be so strong that it compensates for poverty and parents' education levels.

The Current Funding System

A first rate education system requires a school finance system that has adequate resources, targets those resources to the needs of students and fully takes into account the ability of local communities to support the cost of education. South Carolina's current education funding system does none of the above well. Instead, education funding in South Carolina is largely a function of the legislature first deciding how much money it has and is willing to spend, and then dividing this limited "education pie" among the state's schools. Our current state school funding system has seven elements.

1. A Low Level of Overall Funding for Education: The politicized process of funding education from year-to-year has led to our state investing comparatively very little in

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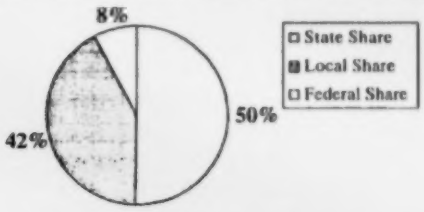
education. Relying on federal, state, and local sources, South Carolina spent an average of $7218 per student last year. Our level of funding ranks our state 36th nationally in education spending per student.

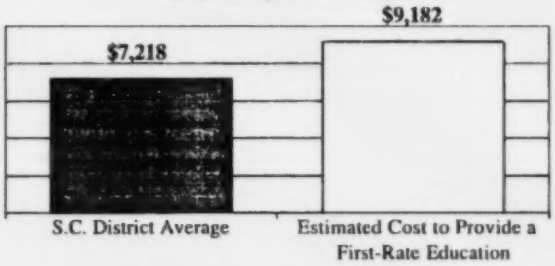
Sources of S.C. Education Funding



Source: National Education Association

Several years ago, state education leaders commissioned a study by school finance experts to determine the funding necessary for all South Carolina students to receive a high quality education. The study concluded that it would cost $9182 per student, reflecting the gulf between educational need and the resources we currently provide to schools.

Funding Per Student



Sources: South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, Augenblick & Myers

2. The Education Finance Act: The foundation for state funding of schools is the Education Finance Act, which accounts for about one-third of the total cost of education. The EFA provides schools with a per-pupil amount based on a formula that takes into account the relative wealth of school districts. This commendable effort to level the education playing field means that wealthy school districts receive less per student under the EFA than do poor districts. Despite its intention to create fairness, however, the EFA does not support a first rate education. For one, it is funded at the inadequate level of only $2,033 per student. Second, this low level of funding has failed to keep pace with inflation. And finally, because the EFA only funds a portion of our education system, its "fairness formula" does not apply to other programs in South Carolina's public schools, thereby creating major differences in school funding from district to district.

3. The Education Improvement Act: Under the Education Improvement Act, schools also receive state funds collected from the penny increase in the state sales tax. The EIA currently provides money to schools for important education programs such as early childhood programs, family literacy, teacher training, academic assistance programs and teacher salaries and benefits. Within this program, districts are receiving some targeted dollars for student academic assistance based upon the number of Free or Reduced Price Lunch-eligible students they have, but not nearly the amount education experts estimate it takes to overcome the devastating effects of poverty on a child's education. Also, EIA funds are allotted to school districts without consideration of the poverty level of the district or its taxpaying effort. Thus, rich and poor school districts alike receive the same amount of funds for programs, regardless of their circumstances or needs. In addition, schools are not allowed to use their EIA dollars for other programs. Most importantly, however, is the fact that the legislature has never carefully looked at the EIA to decide if it reflects the true costs of what it takes to provide schools with the resources they need.

4. Competitive Grants: South Carolina has chosen to fund many programs crucial to students in poor and rural schools through special pots of money that are funded through a grant process. To receive funding for such programs as English as a Second Language, Alternative Schools, and Drop-out Prevention, schools must submit applications for limited resources. Under these conditions, low-wealth and rural schools, with limited staff, are at a disadvantage when they have to compete with larger, better-funded school districts. In the end, rural and low-wealth schools—the schools that often need extra funding the most–lose out in the effort to get the funding they need for educational success.

5. Local Supplements: In our state, school districts supplement the cost of education using local property taxes, bonds, and private grants from major corporations, foundations and individuals. These funds represent a substantial portion of the education funding pie, but funding from these sources varies greatly across the state. Where jobs are plentiful and economic development abounds, communities have the potential to contribute significantly to supplement the cost of education. But where these conditions do not exist, particularly in many rural areas, despite taxing themselves at high levels, schools cannot generate the funding needed for a first-rate education. This system, which relies heavily on each local community's ability and willingness to fund education, has created funding gaps and disparities that make little educational sense and do not match funding for schools with the unique needs of students.

6. Weighted Funding for Special Education: One area in which the state has made an effort to match educational resources with student needs is funding for disabled students. The current state aid formula for special education

recognizes that special education students need greater resources than regular education students. Thus, the state currently provides schools with approximately double per-pupil allotments for each special education student. Despite this commendable effort to match funding with actual student need, it nevertheless falls well below the amount of funding recommended by most education experts.

*7. **Targeted Funding for At-Risk Students:*** When the state computes the number of students in each district, different weights are given to different types of students. These weights are meant to reflect the relative costs of education; for example, more money is allocated for students enrolled in special education. A variety of education policy experts have concluded that students living in poverty also need special, additional programs to help them succeed, and that poverty is the most consistent factor in predicting which students will need additional support. Recent studies estimate that the actual additional cost of educating low-income children is between two and two and one-half times that of non-poor children. Our state is making an effort at addressing poor students' needs by allocating some program dollars based upon Free- and Reduced-Price Lunch-eligibility. Unfortunately, the amount received by districts falls far short of what it takes to adequately fund programs that work, and in many cases, these dollars only reach children after they have failed.

Impact of No Child Left Behind

The federal No Child Left Behind Act with its emphasis on high quality teachers and raising achievement levels for all students, especially low-income and minority students, raises crucial issues about how South Carolina's state school finance system is structured and funded. Already, 31 of our schools have been labeled as low-performing under the new law. Given this ominous early sign of our state's readiness to meet the requirements of the new law, the question that must be asked and answered in the immediate future is: Does South Carolina's school finance system ensure that schools have the resources they need in order to ensure every student a full and fair opportunity to meet the bold goals of the federal law? This report suggests that our current funding system falls woefully short in addressing the funding needs of schools and students. Clearly, if South Carolina expects its schools to succeed under the new law, it must take stock of its school finance system.

South Carolina Must Invest More in Education

The conclusion to be drawn from the above picture of our school finance system is clear. We will not achieve a first rate education system unless we put more resources into education and change the way we allocate funds to schools. Whether living in a rural community or wealthy suburb, all children can achieve at high levels when presented with clear expectations, evenly applied standards, demanding courses, strong teachers, and focused resources to meet their needs. To be sure, building this foundation will cost money. To address the needs of rural – and all – children, we must invest more. If South Carolina targets additional funding toward schools and students relative to their need and the ability of local communities to contribute to the cost of education, we can have a first rate education system in which all children succeed.

Recommendations to Ensure Schools Have Necessary Resources to Provide Every Student with a First Rate Education

No citizen – rural or suburban – wants to bear a heavy tax burden, but an investment in education is the single most important one we can make in order to build a strong South Carolina. Evaluating what it will take to provide every student with a first rate education, deciding whether property taxes are fairly assessed and apportioned among taxpayers, determining the most secure balance of funding that should come from the state and local communities, and determining the source of new revenues should be the highest priority for legislators and education policymakers.

- **The legislature should commission a study by an independent education consulting firm to determine the true per-pupil cost of providing South Carolina's children with educational opportunities that will enable them to meet the state's educational standards and goals and the requirements of No Child Left Behind. Thereafter, the legislature should fully fund the EFA at this level using a multi-year phase in process.**

- **In order to ensure that schools have the extra resources they need to educate at-risk students, the legislature should create and fully fund a new weighted category within the Base Student Cost that provides schools with extra funding for each student who is at risk of academic failure. The at-risk weighed funding level should reflect the experiences of other states that developed such systems in recent years.**

- **The important EIA programs should be allocated through the same wealth-sensitive formula used in EFA so that rural districts with low property wealth are not unfairly burdened by inadequate funding to meet state law requirements of these programs. By doing so, low wealth and rural school districts with high percentages of at-risk students and low property values will receive the educational resources they need to address the unique needs of their students. Other programs directly impacting students at risk of academic exclusion or failure should also be funded in this manner rather than by grants.**

- **Further study should be conducted on the tax-paying efforts of districts to determine whether high-wealth districts are providing a proportionate share of school funding and to ensure that low-wealth districts are not bearing an unfair tax burden. Following such a study, a measure of tax-paying effort should be included in determinations of funding for school districts.**

Conclusion

The high goals and detailed recommendations presented in this report are by no means going to be easily achieved, but we believe they can and should be made into reality. The challenge of assuring that every South Carolina student receives a first-rate education is one that will take all of our best efforts. Much of this report calls on policymakers to make specific changes that we believe will strengthen rural – and all – schools in our state. This means making a real commitment to provide all children with access to excellent schools – and to reduce the enormous variations that currently exist.

We recognize that it is not just the responsibility of those in elected and appointed office to work for better schools. Public education is a public responsibility – of families and their students, working together with school leadership, the community, businesses, and government. We accept this responsibility and present this report neither as professional policy analysts, nor as disengaged observers of the system, but as citizens deeply invested in public schools and committed to their success.

We also recognize that this report calls for actions that must take place outside of schools. South Carolina students cannot meet high expectations and achieve their goals while we remain among the worst states on child well-being measures such as low birth weight rates, chronic illness rates, abuse, neglect, unsafe and unhealthy living environments, and lack of access to health care. The process of improving classrooms must begin with protecting children's health, safety, and well-being.

We call on all South Carolinians to summon the courage to do what it takes to ensure that all of South Carolina's children – rural or suburban, rich or poor – have not only their basic needs met, but that they have the opportunity to reach their own highest goals.

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